Not a ‘slam dunk’: US intelligence can’t prove Assad used chemical weapons

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Syrian President Bashar Assad (AFP/SANA) / AFP

Only days after the White House suggested it was all but certain Syrian President Bashar Assad used chemical weapons to gas hundreds of civilians, United States intelligence officials briefed on the situation say the evidence isn’t all there.

Despite recent remarks from US President Barack Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry and other top administration officials, sources within the intelligence community are disputing the certainty that Assad ordered the use of chemical gas last week on innocent civilians outside of Damascus, Syria.

Four US officials — including one senior member of the intelligence community — told the Associated Press this week that there’s confusion over where the reported chemical warheads are currently being held and who exactly possesses them. Citing a lapse in both signals and human intelligence reports, the officials all told the AP on condition of anonymity that US and allied spies “*have lost track of who controls some of the country's chemical weapons supplies*,” according to reporters Kimberly Dozier and Matt Apuzzo.

Multiple officials, the AP reported Thursday morning, used the phrase “*not a slam dunk*” to discuss the credibility of intelligence linking chemical weapon use directly to Pres. Assad. In 2002, then-Central Intelligence Agency Director George Tenet

infamously said Washington scored a "*slam dunk*" with regards to confirming Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction. Now more than a decade down the road, US officials hesitant to rush off to war are again questioning the credibility of the White House's own report.

According to an Office of the Director for National Intelligence report cited by the AP, the evidence against Syria "*is thick with caveats*" and contains gaps that are getting in the way of putting the chemical weapon use directly in the hands of Assad.
But Carney, the administration's press secretary, said earlier this week that the White House "*established with a high degree of confidence that the Syria regime has used chemical weapons already in this conflict*."
"*It is our firm conviction that the Assad regime is responsible*" for gassing civilians on August 21, Carney added. "*Logic dictates that conclusion, as well as the hard facts. And the president is working with his national security team to evaluate the options available to him to respond, as well as consulting with international allies and consulting with members of Congress*."
Those remarks echoed a statement made by Kerry this week as well in which he said the White House was certain Assad's regime maintains custody of the chemical weapons used, and that the regime "*has been determined to clear the opposition from those very places where the attacks took place*."
Kerry fell short of directly saying Assad ordered the attack, but Obama made that allegation during an interview with PBS' NewsHour on Wednesday.

"*We have concluded that the Syrian government in fact carried these out*," Obama said of the assault. "*And if that's so, then there need to be international consequences*."
Earlier this week, Foreign Policy reporter Noah Shachtman wrote that the US intelligence community recently intercepted conversations in Syria that suggested the Aug. 21 assault could have been not necessarily ordered by Assad, but perhaps "*the work of a Syrian officer overstepping his bounds*."
"*It's unclear where control lies*," one US intelligence official told Foreign Policy. "Is there just some sort of general blessing to use these things? Or are there explicit orders for each attack?"
"*We don't know exactly why it happened*," the official added. "*We just know it was pretty fucking stupid*."
Pres. Obama is briefing members of Congress on the Syrian situation on Thursday using conclusions made by US intelligence, after which a declassified report is expected to be released to the public.

https://www.rt.com/usa/us-syria-intelligence-slamdunk-163/

'Footage of chemical attack in Syria is fraud'

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An image grab taken from a video uploaded on YouTube by the Arbeen unified press office on August 21, 2013 shows a man comforting a Syrian girl in shock as she screams in Arabic "I am alive" following an attack in which Syrian opposition claim the regime used chemical weapons in eastern Ghouta, on the outskirts of Damascus (AFP Photo) / AFP

There is proof the footage of the alleged chemical attack in Syria was fabricated, Mother Agnes Mariam el-Salib, mother superior of St. James Monastery in Qara, Syria, told RT. She says she is about to submit her findings to the UN.

Mother Agnes, a catholic nun, who has been living in Syria for 20 years and has been reporting actively on what has been going on in the war-ravaged country, says she carefully studied the video featuring allegedly victims of the chemical weapons attack in the Syrian village of Guta in August and now questions its authenticity.

In her interview with RT, Mother Agnes doubts so much footage could have been taken in so little time, and asks where parents of the supposedly dead children are. She promises to send her report to the UN.

The nun is indignant with the world media for apparently turning a blind eye to the Latakia massacre by rebel extremists, which left 500 civilians including women and children dead.

Russia's Foreign Ministry has called on the international community to pay attention to revelations made by Mother Agnes Mariam el-Salib.

RT: *The United States has used internet photos and video footage of the supposed chemical weapons attack in Eastern Guta to build a case against the Syrian*

government. Have you been able to look at these files? What do you have to say about them?

Mother Agnes: I have carefully studied the footage, and I will present a written analysis on it a bit later. I maintain that the whole affair was a frame-up. It had been staged and prepared in advance with the goal of framing the Syrian government as the perpetrator.
The key evidence is that Reuters made these files public at 6.05 in the morning. The chemical attack is said to have been launched between 3 and 5 o'clock in the morning in Guta. How is it even possible to collect a dozen different pieces of footage, get more than 200 kids and 300 young people together in one place, give them first aid and interview them on camera, and all that in less than three hours? Is that realistic at all? As someone who works in the news industry, you know how long all of it would take.

The bodies of children and teenagers we see in that footage – who were they? What happened to them? Were they killed for real? And how could that happen ahead of the gas attack? Or, if they were not killed, where did they come from? Where are their parents? How come we don't see any female bodies among all those supposedly dead children?

I am not saying that no chemical agent was used in the area – it certainly was. But I insist that the footage that is now being peddled as evidence had been fabricated in advance. I have studied it meticulously, and I will submit my report to the UN Human Rights Commission based in Geneva.

RT: *Recently you've visited Latakia and the adjacent areas, you've talked to the eyewitnesses to the massacre of civilians carried out in Latakia by Jabhat al-Nusra. What can you tell us about it?*

MA: What I want to ask first of all is how the international community can ignore the brutal killing spree in Latakia on Laylat al-Qadr early in the morning of August 5, an attack that affected more than 500 people, including children, women and the elderly. They were all slaughtered. The atrocities committed exceed any scale. But there was close to nothing about it in the international mass media. There was only one small article in "The Independent", I believe.
We sent our delegation to these villages, and our people had a look at the situation on-site, talked to the locals, and most importantly – talked to the survivors of the massacre.

I don't understand why the Western media apply double standards in this case – they talk about mass murder that the use of chemical weapons resulted in non-stop, but they keep quiet about the Latakia massacre.

RT: *Do you know anything about the fate of hostages captured in Latakia?*

MA: In the village of Estreba they massacred all the residents and burnt down their houses. In the village of al-Khratta almost all the 37 locals were killed. Only ten people were able to escape.
A total of twelve Alawite villages were subjected to this horrendous attack. That was a true slaughterhouse. People were mutilated and beheaded. There is even a video that shows a girl being dismembered alive – alive! – by a frame saw. The final death toll exceeded 400, with 150 to 200 people taken hostage. Later some of the hostages were killed, their deaths filmed.

At the moment we are looking for the hostages and negotiating their release with the militants, but so far we haven't managed to achieve that.

RT: *We often hear reports of Christians being persecuted by the militants. Just the day before yesterday there was an attack in the village of Maaloula, where the majority of population is Christian. Are Christians in Syria facing grave danger?*

MA: Everyone in Syria is facing grave danger. There was a case of Muslim religious leaders being kidnapped and beheaded. They were humiliated and tortured. Ismailis, the druze, Christians – people from all parts of Syrian society – are being mass murdered. I would like to say that if these butchers didn't have international support, no one would have dared to cross the line. But today, unfortunately, the violation of human rights and genocide in Syria is covered up on the international level. I demand the international community stops assessing the situation in Syria in accordance with the interests of a certain group of great powers. The Syrian people are being killed. They fall victim to contractors, who are provided with weapons and sent to Syria to kill as many people as possible. The truth is, everywhere in Syria people are being kidnapped, tortured, raped and robbed. These crimes remain unpunished, because the key powers chose

international terrorism as a way to destroy sovereign states. They've done it to other countries. And they will just keep doing it if the international community doesn't say "Enough!"

RT: *You've managed to get hold of some sensitive information. Does this make you fear for your life as someone who keeps documents that may compromise the militants? Has anyone threatened you?*

MA: You are right. I do get threatened. They are trying to discredit me. I know there is a book coming out soon in France that labels me as a criminal who kills people. But any believer should first and foremost trust their conscience, their belief in God, and that will help them save innocent lives. I don't care much about my own life. My life is no more precious than that of any Syrian child, whose body could be used as evidence to justify wrongdoing. This is the biggest crime ever perpetrated in history.

RT: *What should the Syrians do to stop the tragedy they are going through?*

MA: The Syrians themselves can do nothing to stop it. They can only rely on the international community, friendly nations, world powers, such as Russia, China, and India. With a lot of enthusiasm we did welcome the news that the British parliament voted against the participation of their country in the possible war against Syria. There is a terrorist war going on against Syria right now. The international community and Syria's friends should join forces and say: Enough! And they need to use every opportunity to do that. Otherwise this threat Syria is facing now will turn into a threat to universal peace.

RT:*What should the Vatican and other hubs of Christianity do to put an end to this tragedy?*

MA: The Pope says he has no planes, no bombs, and no armed forces. Instead, he has the power of the truth, and the truth he has told. There are messages coming from everywhere in the world urging against a military intervention in Syria. Those who want to hear them will. The Pope, the patriarchs, Nobel Prize winners, including women, keep saying the same in unison: Let's stop fighting. No conflict can be solved by military means. Stop adding fuel to the flame!
All the prominent public figures in the world have risen to speak against the war. Everyone has spoken their mind, but the US prefers to turn a deaf ear. The world public opinion has turned against the US. It's the first time in history that America is alone. They are claiming that they are backed by ten countries. But I insist they aren't, because

the people of these countries disagree with their governments. Even the American people disagree with their government.

RT: *Do you believe that this tragedy will end and Syria will remain a homeland for all Syrians, regardless of their ethnical or religious identity?*

MA: I'm not Syrian myself, but I've been living in Syria for 20 years. I'd like to remind everyone that Damascus is the most ancient capital in the world. I would like to remind everyone that Syria is the cradle of civilization. I would like to remind everyone that this is the holy land that gave birth to the main world religions. What is happening in Syria should serve as a lesson for everyone. I mean that in existential rather than political sense. I am convinced that with God's help the Syrian people will be able to remain strong, heal their wounds, reconcile and chase out all the foreign mercenaries and terrorists. I believe there will be peace in Syria. But for that we need help from the international community.

https://www.rt.com/op-edge/mother-chemical-attack-footage-fraud-509/